

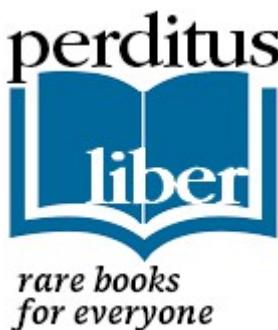
# THREE NAILS



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by

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## **Three Nails**

By

H. A. Manhood

Published 1933

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*by*

*H. A. MANHOOD*



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**M**ALPAS died this evening, quietly and easily, and it seems to me now that the world is smaller than it was, that it has lost all bloom and promise.

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I can feel the measured, inescapable drive of death on all sides, in flesh and earth, in leaf and wind, but there is no acceptance in my mind. I want to escape the rot, but there is nowhere, nothing.

All day long he had begged me to nail one of his fine white hands to the oak bedpost that he might know the agony he had caused his wife so many years before, be prepared, maybe, for a meeting in the spirit, although that was against the striving logic of his mind. At times the vapours thinned, whipping clear of his thoughts so that he spoke firmly, understandingly:

“You know, boy, I really meant to nail her flat, make her see that fact and religion won’t mix, that it is fact we must live by. And when that young bargaining rogue came I was going to lock them together, give them time to suffer crucifixion, understand it all, and then fire the barn. And it all seemed right and just for hadn’t they crucified me enough with their dallying? But then your aunt, she was only curious, tapful and morbid with it. She believed they were truly the nails with which He was crucified, and it seemed nothing at all to give herself to gain ’em. No sense in it, even if they had been, but then women are like that, everlastingly corkscrewing after the things they think they want, straight after a fashion you see but not knife

straight. Well, well, she was a fine wife after all. She really thought the nails would bring back luck and honour to us, that it was our duty to cherish them. A queer way of

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thinking, but then I suppose most of us need to cherish something. A man and a woman ought to satisfy all sides of each other, but it isn't often they do, more's the pity. We were lucky, though it was an unkind way of coming together. Come now, boy, just a good sort of nail and a hammer. I want to know what it feels like, through the palm, what I caused her, what happened to Him. Haven't I the right?"

But I would not, and he shook his head wearily, regretfully, imagination turning towards another nailing so that he spoke like one who had seen Jesus on His Cross, the words slow and vivid as if they had been felt and used for the first time:

"You know, boy, I've thought about it often since then. I can smell the stench of that crowd. I can see them now tying His hands to the cross-piece and nailing them, can see Him stiffening in agony, and His eyes going empty. Then they bent back His feet and nailed them too, and raised the Cross into its socket in the rock, wedging it tight. And He was quiet and still for a little while, flesh and mind lost and stunned. But soon the bleeding stopped and He began to breathe again, choking slowly, His ribs jerking and cracking, His mind waking to the agony. His tongue sucked at

his twisted lips, but what was the use of drink when the body was fixed and immovable?

“Terrible to think of it all. His body going grey and rotten, patched with blue where the veins had broken, scabby and crusted with sweat.

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His neck thickening, His cheeks blown and purple, His face sunken, His eyes dragging inwards, His nose swollen, bursting, His lips twisting back over his broken gums. Choking slowly, fevers working through Him, His heart and lungs, veins and guts all twisted and tied, His backbone dislocated, every muscle stretched to breaking, every nerve a broken needle, His life draining away in His sight from a bloody rupture.

“Presently he suffocates. His head shakes, and quivers, and His body swells and heaves and His joints crack, and the flies are blown from His bleeding nostrils and settle again. His hair is sucked into His mouth as His head rocks. He shakes in a last great agony and the Cross rocks. Then He is still, dead, a broken hanging figure for all the world to remember.

“Death to Him, as to all of us and nothing beyond. Belief or no belief, what difference does it make? What difference does it make even for a man to be remembered kindly? Foolish for a man with a man’s mind to believe that he is one with the God of all creation. The mind cannot hold the idea even. Let him be a king among men, wise and helpful to his kind, but let him not claim to understand the working and making of life for in that there is no meaning as we see

it. Still, it was a great belief and a pity to cheapen it by worship as men have done ever since. We live and die, and that is the end. Better to understand that early, for it makes life easier. Remember that, boy; remember it always."

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He was quiet for a little while after that, and then he coughed once, stared at the palms of his hands, then through the open window and lay back in death, a wry smile of understanding on his face.

Terribly alone in the dusk I wondered on it all, memory springing clear comfortingly, Malpas well and living in my mind so that his stillness seemed but that of heavy sleep. They used to say that he was not a self-made man since he had married my mother's sister, and with her a small amount of money. But, by God! he'd worked the seed well, caused it to increase many times over by sheer sweat and skill. He'd left his savings to me, perhaps because I'd never spoken or blamed him.

A baker in the employ of an old, patch-capped village master since boyhood, he had waited his time, offering the right sum at the right moment, assuming proprietorship as if it were a comfortable suit of clothes, himself painting his own name upon the scrolled facia board and otherwise preparing and sweetening the rooms behind and over the long sunken shop at Faitham Corner for my aunt. And an excellent job he had made of it all. Certainly my aunt was very well pleased. Eight years younger than Malpas, she was then but twenty-four, very beautiful in a fragile

wild-rose way, self-willed under her Quakerish meekness, quick to believe in the miraculous and apt to sulkiness when the winds blew harsh, as I have heard it said, although it was not for more than a year that she found cause for the first and only grimly sincere sulk of her life.

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For that first year they were quite happy. Life was new and sweet for them. At one step they had become master and mistress, and entitled to respect. Perhaps in the happy newness of it all Malpas neglected at times the blending of flours and the working of his doughs. Certainly his breads were uneven in quality. And then, like a warning, strangely, inexplicably, in late summer, three whole batches of bread, when cut, became covered with tiny red spots like drops of blood, and the villagers were frightened by this bloody sweat so that Malpas was almost ruined. A carrier brought bread from a neighbouring town, and Malpas was faced with daily losses. Fearful of bankruptcy after this calamity, thinking they would surely end in a crumbling, wormy cottage with only a labourer's wage to support them, my aunt soured and prayed often, blaming the harassed Malpas, believing foolishly that a judgement was come upon them for their indulgences, urging bleak piety upon him until he must have doubted whether this was the same shrewd, laughing woman whom he had married so proudly.

A fine figure of a man, not exactly big, but sensibly built and square-standing, with astonishingly strong white hands, Malpas had at first been gentle and

lavish-humoured, tolerant of his wife's fancies. But with failure impending he became grim and quiet, settling to work with all his heart, so that there was little or no time for merriness with my aunt, even had she been willing. Once more he chose and blent his own flours, careful as a chemist,

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governing his temperatures to produce a beautifully-spung, fully-ripe loaf, no easy task in the huge, old-fashioned and queer-tempered bakehouse. And my aunt, not understanding, brooded and looked for comfort in her Bible and in the company of dour, psalming elders on the green, trying mournfully, absurdly, to attone for the abandonments of marriage, withholding herself until a sign should come and their fortunes be mended.

So it was at the time of my visit. Finding serious defects in his oven, Malpas had sent word to a kilnster of our village, bidding him come with his tools and repair gear, quickly too, else the need would be gone. Very well understanding Malpas' plight, old Timely Blunt had agreed to go, to drive his two-horse waggon four and twenty miles from one county to another with everything he needed except sand, which was sharper at Faitham, and to work through a Saturday and a Sunday, day and night if necessary, until the repair was done.

My mother was ill at the time, and it became necessary to operate. My continual questioning and constant gaze and thought of the probable effects of the sight of suffering on my young mind had long

bothered her and she could not bear that I should remain in the house at such a critical time. So it was arranged that I should stay with her sister at Faitham, travelling with Timely on a Friday and returning with him the following Monday.

Unnecessarily early one bright September morning when the mists were still level on the grass I

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was waiting for Timely, dressed uncomfortably in my best. A basket containing less ceremonial clothes, food and seventeen yards of hand-bobbed lace for my aunt stood on the hollow-worn step, and I munched impatiently at bread and butter sprinkled with brown sugar as I counted over my treasures in the dresser cupboard and filled my pockets with those which seemed indispensable. Now I moved anxiously from room to room, holding the heavy curtains aside, clouding the glass with my breath, sick to think of the many accidents which might so easily prevent the journey. A white cat prowled in the neglected, cobwebbed garden, and I blamed it shrilly for the delay and might even have killed it with a sling-shot had not a deep, reassuring rumble sounded in the distance.

Shouting farewells through the house, I bolted to the gate, but was recalled to kiss my mother's soft, anxious face, and receive messages for my aunt and a code of conduct. Running again, I stood prepared to board the waggon as it passed, in case Timely forgot to stop. But there was no need for apprehension. A great

clatter and jingling and the bump of wheels on the axle trees and the waggon appeared, hauled by two enormously dignified horses, Timely perched like a weather-bleached figure-head on the graceful sweeping bow, his stepson Gabriel behind, sprawled on the tarpaulin-covered burden, a morose-seeming, sallowly handsome youth with a curious tuft of white hair on his temple as if he'd been kissed by the

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miller's daughter as my father had once said and was hushed by my mother.

Acknowledging my shout with a flourish of whip and a cheerful grin, Timely brought the team to a standstill, arranging a pack of sacks beside him for my comfort. Ever since I'd seen him sliding by himself on an icebound pond, and enjoying it immensely, he'd been kindly to me. My father appeared in his shirt-sleeves, half-shaved and unbraced — he had no pride of appearances, my mother used to say — a large tin of latakia in his hand.

“Here, master, grist for the mill. My respects to Malpas and tell him if he can't meet your bill, I can. Looks like fine weather. Don't let the boy be a nuisance. Goodbye, son. Don't eat too many cakes, or green apples. Catch!”

A bright half-crown, ill-spared, spun and was caught in my already grubby hands, and then my father swung me easily on to the shafts and into Timely's

care, striding away into the house without a backward glance, as he knew I would wish him to, for I hated pamper-glances and farewells. A clack of the tongue and a signal twitch of the reins and the team drove forward along the ancient road.

Of that day-long journey, the longest in my life till then, I still have pleasant, vigorous memories. We walked up the worst hills and allowed the horses breathing space as they needed it, watering them once at a great stone trough fed by spouting

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dolphins and again at a pond where a silk-jacketed parson fished solemnly, heedless of the dragonflies that spun bewilderingly like flying splinters of rare blue glass. The sedges on the margin were level as a broomhead, and the yellow leaves of the willows hung like the drying shirts of small golden fish. I hoped that Silk-jacket would hook a fish while we waited, but instead of a fish on a line we saw a fish crosswise in the yellow bayonet bill of a heron slow-rising among the reeds. With trailing legs and head thrown back the great bird sailed low over us in all his gray and white glory, the fish large and no impediment, and the parson shook a furious, unclerical fist after it, so that we laughed, Timely and I, although Gabriel only brooded lower over a little black bug of a book. Asking, presently, what the book might be, for books were just then beginning to interest me deeply, Timely grunted and banged his pipe violently against the red-painted rail:

“Silly young bugger’s gone religious, like his mother!”

And I thought at first it was a disease and was sorry for a moment, thinking the white temple-tuft was a sign. Idly, pratingly, I remembered a similar book, lately published, received in exchange for a bull-blaster from a school-fellow, and my father’s opinion of it:

“He said that it was not true, that it was mock-purple, a book for fools and childless women, a theatre-piece, a bag of wind by a fish nor fowl squatting on a steeple.”

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With the precision of a parrot I repeated his words and Timely nodded understandingly. And then the angry, unexpected voice of Gabriel caused us to turn: “Your father is a bloody fool!”

The book was the same and for a few minutes I fumed and spluttered at the insult, muttering stupid threats, for my father was good and right in my eyes. With difficulty Timely calmed me and, hating Gabriel, simply and bitterly, I looked ahead again, questioning eagerly, feeling dimly that knowledge was a defence and weapon against Gabriel and his sulphurous kind.

Some of the questions remain in my mind to this day, interesting now as then. With what exactly was the waggon loaded? Why did they make bricks of a certain size? Did all rabbits have an equal number of whiskers and was a small bird afraid to pass in front of

a flock of big ones? Why did gnats make a flying ball over damp places? Was it true that a fox rid himself of fleas by creeping slowly under water so that the climbing, water-shy fleas were washed off? Patiently and reasonably, as my father would have done, Timely answered, damning Gabriel for his contemptuous grunts:

“Better if thee were occupied with the like, than with bald heavenly nonsense!”

Damning him too, for his curtness to those who stopped us on our way with cheerful, laughing talk, farmers and cottagers to whom Timely was an adventurous friend. Many of them wanted to know

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why I rode with him, and he told them neatly and humorously, and they brought cakes and apples and milk, and once some sherry which I refused after the first sip, but which Timely tipped down quick as you'd turn a key. Contemptuous too, of such sweet-toothing Gabriel lit a very new pipe, smoking solemnly, and I was glad to turn my back on him.

At noonday we ate in the shade of an enormous oak on a hill, I from my basket, although I was not particularly hungry after the gifts of the morning, Timely and Gabriel from theirs, a huge flag basket stuffed with a great, clown-shaped loaf, a lump of fat, cloth-wrapped bacon, and an onion or so lying loose in the bottom. And to wash the food down a two gallon

jar of home-brewed “fierce and mild,” a contradiction which puzzled me then, was lifted from the wheel-box. Eating slowly, seriously, cutting meat and bread together with an enviable claspknife, Timely studied the oak:

“Better for thee to consider the ways of natural things than to stuff thyself with cobwebs,” he counselled the reading, sulking Gabriel.

Was he eating cobwebs, then? I questioned, but Timely shook his head and picked up a crumb or so: “Much worse,” he said, and lay back in brief, thoughtful doze while Gabriel, angered, mooned away towards the drifting smoke of a gipsy fire deep in the gorse. Alone, I picked blackberries very contentedly, cooling nettled knees

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with dock-milk and altering the laces of my metal-capped boots from criss-cross to single-stitch in the way advocated by Timely. Returning to the shade of the oak I found Timely wiping his bald head to a new shininess with a red, white-spotted handkerchief, and he inspected my changed laces approvingly, accepting a dozen beautifully ripe berries, moralising quietly, so that now, remembering from year to year, I feel intensely the rise of the sap and the first greenness of leaves:

“A wonderful thing, the strength of a tree, stemful of rushing life, sending leaves from every twig

whether 'tis high or low, and no fuss about it. No sulking either if its neighbours are queer. They just do what's right and natural, and like it."

Raising himself upright from his knees he replaced jar and basket in the wheelbox, murmuring to the horses, perhaps offering the same thought, feeding a lump of bread to each and looking to their shoes and harness. Drag chains on the wheels, and he was ready. But where was Gabriel? "God blast him!" Timely swore and blew a shrill whistle between his fingers. A waiting and then Gabriel came running from out of the gorse, but a new Gabriel, flushed and exultant. Come to us he showed three very large, queerly rusted nails wrapped in a bit of old red velvet:

"Look! I got them from the gipsies, but it was hard to make them part. They called them the Jeshua nails ... it was with these they crucified the Lord Jesus."

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Timely stared in brief amazement, looked closer at the nails, and spat noisily: "You paid 'em well?"

Gabriel nodded: "All I had, but weren't they worth it? Just think..."

"God help thee for a simpleton. 'Tis rather I should see thee wenching than flinging cash to such dirty traders."

"You don't believe?" Gabriel squinted whitely.

"I've heard they make 'em on their own little forge after an old pattern, rust 'em proper with acid, and wait for such as you."

Timely snatched purposefully, and the nails, bundled in the old velvet, sailed high and fell far away in the gorse.

“Now come on!”

I thought for a moment that Gabriel would fell the old man. He swayed a bit in snorting anger, then plunged into the gorse in fierce search. Shaking his head gloomily Timely went to the waggon, looking at his watch, waiting wrathily. I wanted to ask more about the nails, but Timely spoke first.

“Go tell him we’re leaving. He can come or not, as he chooses.”

Glad to carry his word, I ran into the gorse towards Gabriel. He was threshing and muttering, near to weeping I saw triumphantly. Almost come to him I stopped short in astonishment, nearly stepping on the shabby velvet bundle as it lay among ferns. Jubilantly and unseen, I picked

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it up, seeing opportunity to be revenged on Gabriel for his insult. I would keep the nails for a while, give him something to regret. Hastily I stuffed them into a trouser pocket, pushing boldly forward, repeating Timely’s message, adding on my own account: “*We don’t care, you fool!*”

A savage grunt was Gabriel’s only reply, and he went on raking backwards and forwards. Well pleased, I watched for a moment, then ran back to Timely, wanting to tell him of my find, but knowing that he would not see it my way, that he would lose them properly next time. He nodded a bit disgustedly, and

hoisted me on to the shafts, gathering the reins and starting the horses on their awkward way, walking beside them down the hill, speaking to them with a quietness which yet carried above the jarring rumble of the waggon and the slap and jingle of harness. Looking back, my heart jumped to see Gabriel running after us, and I thought he had found me out, regretting my trick, imagining a shameful confession before Timely. But I decided that he could not possibly suspect me, and I was relieved to see him clamber back to his place on the waggon without a word. I thought it would be clever to ask whether he had found the nails or not, but my tongue would not join in such miserable cunning. Possibly too, I was thinking of the time when I would expose the nails; talk now would make the trick into a crime, so it seemed, so I said nothing, only fingered my bulging pocket very happily. I expected Timely to say something, but he did not,

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only spat again at sight of Gabriel, climbing stiffly beside me at the foot of the hill, allowing me to handle the reins while he filled his pipe with my father's mixture and lit it suckingly.

Steadily we drove along the everlasting turnpike, new interests on all sides, the long hot afternoon full of a special friendliness as of something created for my particular delight. Quaint mossy hamlets hardly blinked as we passed, although sometimes a dog followed noisily as if demanding a due for the privilege. We saw neatly buttoned almshouses with

bonnetted old women nodding in the porches, and a whispering group of servants waiting at the gates of a fine estate to welcome their lord and master. A little later we passed the lord himself, sitting in a remarkably shiny carriage, with his tall hat in one hand, and a cigar in the other, and Timely saluted respectfully, the lord nodding in affable acknowledgement, to my great surprise, for I had not thought that blue blood could bend so easily.

Birds flickered vividly across soft-coloured woodlands. An avenue of maple was like a squad of guardsmen waiting for that same lord. The apple pickers were already busy in the orchards, mounted on makeshift ladders, the apples bright as new enamel on the bending boughs. Hedges were shawled with twining masses of clematis, and I was sad to think that there was no profitable use for the berries gleaming everywhere like the eyes and buttons of men in ambush. A field of yellow,

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sickly-sweet scented mustard was fixed forever in memory because of a scarecrow dressed extravagantly in red tunic and cockaded cap, with a stout pole for gun. We passed teams of steady nodding horses tramping round neat rectangles of corn in which the breezes moved so that the colours changed like a song. The clatter of the reaper had a fine military flavour to my mind, the stooked sheaves martial in their placing and gladly I would have joined the men and boys

waiting with guns and sticks for the rats and rabbits moving in the narrowing cage of stems.

Now the hot smell of peppermint reminded me of a brew my mother sometimes prepared for my father when he returned late on a winter's night and I understood, perhaps for the first time, the eternal saving necessary for comfort, the true meaning of harvest, no small thing. The hum of insects was like that of a gigantic top, a fervid prayer against the webs strung so cunningly between meadowsweet and willowherb, water dock and milk parsley (Timely gave me the names) from which fine butterflies seemed to pause in their feeding to watch as we passed. It amused me to catch the spiders sailing on their looping threads of gossamer, to fly them for an instant as one might a kite. Once we wet a waggon laden with bracken in a narrow way, and the driver, a woman old but tremendously alive, promptly backed into a gateway and waited for us to pass, full of bright curiosity, pleased with Timely's salutation as if it were a brooch to be examined and admired forever after.

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And then we had passed from snug wooded country into open downland, where the wind blew refreshingly cool, and the swallows hawked with new freedom, skimming their fill before travel across the world.

“Off the peat now,” Timely said, and nodded towards the downs: “Solid chalk they be and pretty with it,” and I thought how I would take some home and never be put to the loss of farthings again for

sticks from the postmistress. Corncrakes wheezed from the stubble, and I could not at first believe that birds could sound so ill. We crossed a river yellow-bordered with monkey flower, and, in a barn behind a tidy, square-towered church we saw a merry group busy at a huge cider press, all giants in the first dimness of evening. One hailed us boisterously, offering a bucketful of the green juice, but Timely shook his head: "A wet nose is worse than a blind eye!" and their laughter stayed with us for a long time, so quiet and still was the valley. Moths spun blindly about us, like a large dust raised by the plodding hooves, and Gabriel could no longer see to read in his piety book, but sat in thin-lipped, bitter brooding on his loss. Rounding a corner, our wheels brushing white dust from the hedge, Timely pointed with his whip, and there was Faitham, a comfortable straggle of stone-roofed dwellings, spaced, I declared at once, exactly like the hobnails on my boots.

Malpas' house and shop with the bakehouse and barns stood compactly at a little distance from the

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village proper, alone, but not lonely seeming, rather like a patient group of animals about the spring-fed pond which gleamed in the afterglow like a clean-licked silver dish. Come to the lamp-lighted shop Timely hallooed briefly, and at once the doorbell tinkled and my aunt appeared, glad that I was safe with that singular, quick-lapsing, all-over gladness of the childless married woman. The soft stuff of her dress

smelt faintly of lemon in the stillness, and I remember that she held tightly to a small ivory crucifix pinned to her bodice, as if it were a guide and her only comfort.

With the gift of lace all ready in my hand I jumped down, and gave it to her, stumbling over the phrases my mother had prepared for me, and she smiled so that I thought her very pretty, then kissed me so that I almost regretted the gift. Slowly, however, a sad, strained look returned to her face, and I knew that she was not really glad to see me, that she wanted something which I certainly could not give. Waiting beside her while she directed Timely I turned impatiently to look through the diamond panes of the shop and wonder at the huge calceolaria on the counter.

“Into the yard and clear of the gate. Supper is waiting. You know where the stables are, and the pump, too. I have laid a bed for you in the house, and one for your son in the high barn.”

From the tone of her voice, preoccupied and dulled, I knew that I should be allowed to do very much as I liked. Very gravely Timely thanked her,

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but thought that he would take no supper, preferring to bed down at once and sleep quiet-headed so that he would make an early start in the morning, climbing stiffly down and leading the tired horses into the yard. I heard Malpas greet him simply and warmly, and

would have followed to greet him too had not my aunt led the way down the step into the shop.

The long low room smelt handsomely of bread and spices and before ducking under the counter flap I looked the length of it, punching a fat sack of flour so that my fist was whitened, sniffing at the calceolaria and counting the cottage loaves still standing on a silver-white scrubbed shelf, like snug tortoiseshell cats. Then on into the parlour, bright with the light of a hanging lamp. A fire burned on the wide hearth, for company, my aunt explained — Malpas was so busy — and I nodded understanding, for often at home I made tiny secret fires just for the company of the lively flames. A book lay open on the broad arm of a chair, and I noted disapprovingly its limp black leather covers, and the elaborate silk bookmark dangling like a hanged saint. Was she tarred with the same brush as Gabriel? But I was too hungry for speculation and the table pleased me with its cold pie, ham, dish of red pickled cabbage and round currant cake between bowls of stewed pears and blackberries. Moss roses drooped in gold glazed vases and a mopy canary perched miserably in a pitilessly bright brass cage with church

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coloured glass panels hanging before a small end window.

Answering her dutiful questions after my mother in a very offhand way I followed my aunt down two more steps to the back kitchen to wash in the light of a

fat, spluttering candle, not fussily, delighting in the clanking pump with its leaden spout shaped like a spewing mouth and in the icy coldness of the water. The stone floor was sanded and I scraped unnecessarily upon it so that a mouse ran in terror from under the brass-bound range to my aunt's alarm and my excited amusement. Reaching a trap from a shelf she set it carefully, while I scraped and trod in the hope of unseating another.

But no more bolted and, hearing footsteps, we went back into the parlour, where Gabriel waited, his hair sleek with water, the white tuft like the silver tail of a fish, his eyes already on the little black book. Reminded of the nails I fingered them with secret glee. Then Malpas came, in shirtsleeves, clogs and floured apron, his hairy arms fine-dusted so that a crawling fly looked like a traveller on a snowy heath. Very attentively he listened while I told him of the mouse, and the cider-makers, and the lord in his shiny black beetle of a carriage, and also about the marvellous nails which Gabriel had bought and lost. Gabriel fidgetted at that and looked as if he would like to kill me, and it is possible that he would have done so had he known the nails were so near for he was of an age to strike fiercely on impulse. But Malpas wasn't

particularly interested and soon went back to his work, leaving the three of us to eat and talk.

My aunt, however, had but half an ear for my chatter now. She saw in Gabriel a kindred spirit, and their talk was awkward before me. Twice she said she was sorry to have to bed him in the high barn, but the house was small, and if he was not comfortable they must find a room down in the village, although she sincerely hoped that that would not be necessary. And Gabriel gulped the strong tea and was quite sure that he would be comfortable, cautiously answering her questions about the nails: "The very nails with which He was crucified." My aunt believed implicitly, and was horrified to think that they were lost. Near to laughing, but unwilling to part with the nails so soon, I fidgetted and made crumb patterns until at last my aunt looked up and thought that it was time for bed.

Accustomed to sleeping in a tiny doorless room adjoining that of my parents it was with some alarm that I entered the big, whitewashed upper room with the strangely hilly floor (a marble, fallen from a pocket, rolled drunkenly, and was caught with difficulty) and was hurried into the cool-sheeted, massive four-poster bed. Left alone with a floating wax-light I watched fearfully for the approach of the horrors that must surely dwell behind that castle-high wardrobe and in the long coffin boxes under the windows. But nothing happened beyond a few grisly creakings; the

ceiling did not press lower or the bedposts acquire fighting, strangling limbs. I dared to transfer the nails

from new clothes to old in case I should forget to do so in the morning, and they be found to my everlasting dishonour. Low, commisserative voices came from below stairs, and I was amused between moments of intense fear. I wished that it were possible to reach at least one corner of the under-bed with my toe, but the wish did not become urgent, fading instead into dreamless sleep.

Of my late waking in the morning I remember no more than a reflection of sunlight in a speckled mirror and the watching of a large spider busy in a window angle with a yellow butterfly caught in its web. A feverish fluttering and then, one after the other, the yellow, severed wings fell to the window ledge from which I collected them into a match box after emptying away a chastened pair of lady bugs. The nails were safe as I had left them and after brief inspection of the furnishings of the room I went downstairs dressed in my old, comfortable, rank-smelling corduroys, demanding to know if the mouse had been caught: "Not yet," my aunt answered wearily. A splashing at the pump and I went to wait on the prickly horsehair sofa in the shop parlour while she boiled eggs. Waiting so, kicking my heels and counting the many new loaves, cottage, square and fish-shaped and plaited, on the shelves and counter behind the greeny, curtained glass, I was surprised

by Malpas, no longer in his shirtsleeves, but dressed in large loose clothes but slightly floured. Would I care to

go on the round with him? Indeed I would and at once, and was the horse black or brown? But there was no hurry for half-an-hour. If I'd meet him in the yard at so much by the clock —he made a flour mark on the clock-face — that would do very well. And he smiled through the grey worry on his face and went heavily out into the kitchen. My aunt's voice, aggrieved, spiteful even, answered some question of his and then she came with breakfast, asking where the nails had been lost and did I think they could be found again, watching while I ate, yet not watching for when I spooned honey directly into my mouth she made no protest.

In good time I was waiting in the cobbled yard, near to a mountain of oak cordwood and sprays in which I determined to make a hideaway at the first opportunity. Timely nodded cheerfully from a distance as he went with a hodful of bricks, but Gabriel hardly looked up and I was pleased to see him so Peter Grievous. A driven pig passed along the road, grunting and squealing fearfully, though it was not to death that it was going the drover informed me merrily, but to a wedding, which puzzled me very much in my innocence, for why should they want a pig at a wedding? I might have gone to my aunt for an explanation had not Malpas appeared, leading Soss, the old brown mare, harnessed to a van stuffed carefully

full of fine-crusted bread. In the excitement of departure I forgot about the pigs, even forgot about the nails too for the most of that jog-trot day.

Steadily, until the late afternoon, we “went the round,” wheeling far afield to a few scattered customers, stocking them with bread to last the two days before Malpas went that way again. The day was truly fine, a sweet-hummer of a day, with occasional breezes that lifted the dust of the road in high-swirling battle clouds. Tempted by the crust of the loaves behind me and hungry too long before noon, I meanly tugged scraps loose and ate them, only to be sorry when Malpas, come quickly and silently from a grass path, caught me munching and bolting, for he was not angry, but found me some tiny loaves, pennywheats as they were called, and some spice-buns with sugar nibs a-top, and when these were done there was barley sugar from a tin under the seat, for Malpas, no smoker, had a sweet tooth, and we sucked together the large brown crystals formed so handsomely about a string that you might imagine they were crazy candles. To my questions Malpas found satisfying answers, but now I remember no more than odd facts about the scaling, moulding and proving of the loaves and the mixing of flour; a flour called “hard-winter” mixed with soft flour produced a beautiful, fine-crumbed and well-flavoured loaf, and only a fine ripe flour gave a sparkling crumb and to show what he meant Malpas cut a loaf and I saw a kind of sheen on the

cut crumb, a pleasing silkiness which I have never yet seen equalled and which convinced me then of Malpas' superiority over the mere tailor or candlestick maker.

There were tales too concerning various customers, none of them particularly diverting except one which had to do with a gaunt old woman nearly a century old who sat at a table in her doorway cutting out and sewing leather gloves for gentry folk. As a girl she had fought at Waterloo, donning a man's clothes and habits, even smoking, drinking and gambling to complete the deception. I wanted to ask her all about it, but she had gone stone deaf and I was sure that it was the roar of cannons so long ago which had caused the failing. In her garden was much groundsel and, thinking to please my aunt, I gathered a great bunch for her canary, only to lose the bunch when we forded a stream and my hand forgot its grip.

A high tea waited for us in the shop parlour at Faitham, a tea at which Malpas and my aunt and I sat together, Timely and Gabriel being hard at work on the faulty oven. A little tired of their weight I wondered whether to reveal the nails that night or wait until the talk was of them again, deciding on the more dramatic course. I was quite sure by now that I should not be punished, not even by a curtailment of liberty, for without me the nails would not have been found at all. Easy-minded I therefore joined in talk with Malpas on cats and foxes and the battle of Waterloo,

a quaint print of which hung conveniently close behind me and in which I tried vainly to identify the old lady now so sadly deaf.

Twice the doorbell tinkled sharply, and my aunt went to serve a customer with bread, weighing each loaf scrupulously on the tall brass scales although I never saw that it was necessary to add a chunk of “makeweight” as I had sometimes seen our own village baker do. In any case there was bread enough for ample choice for she returned with a report of the number of loaves that would be wasted unless some unexpected call was made. Very melancholy she seemed, without interest in Malpas’ talk on various happenings: twins at Hareleap Farm; young trees planted on Austin’s Slope; a well dug and water found within 10 feet, “enough to float a ship” — his interest was always in living, touchable things, in sweet creation as I once heard my mother say—and he went soon to the bakehouse to see what progress had been made and to make, as he always did although he was no believer in normal church ceremony, four great sheaf loaves for a Harvest Festival on the following day, loaves which only he in all the district had the skill and patience to make and which were to be baked in a small, emergency pot-oven so as not to disturb Timely in his work. Very anxious to see the making of these special loaves I finished hastily and went after him, my aunt naming a time when she would ring a handbell and expect me dutifully to return to bed.

The bakehouse was a lofty, thick-bricked, echo-barn of a place, smelling strongly of yeast and grain, white-dusted with flour even in its highest corners, the cobwebs under the roof looking like fine lace mats, or even thin-chalked targets. The oak mixing troughs were scrubbed and worn to an appropriate whiteness, although the floor, whereon they had threshed in the days when the place had been a farmstead, formed of long planks of heart of oak, pegged inseparably together, was black under a powdering of flour, a perfect drum of a floor. The bright bits of ornamental brass and a rail or two on the oven front pleased me deeply, suggesting a bank or mint to my mind, a place where money might be baked to perfection, for I had always imagined that coins were first shaped, then cooked — what more logical?

In a corner sacks of flour stood like clusters of gigantic nuts, variously tied, some with a red, distinguishing tag, others with a blue one, some even with a beautiful tongue of soft leather, two pieces of which I quickly begged for use in a catapult.

“A little of red tie and some of blue for the usual bake, but leather tie for the quick specials, and sometimes some of each, it all depends on the weather and use. The colour of the tie is John Miller’s way of marking different kinds of flour.”

So Malpas explained, then went behind the oven to talk with Timely as he worked. The defects had been found, one in the crown of the oven and

the other in a sinkage of sand under the sole, causing an air-blow. The work was well forward and Timely's level, reassuring tones had a churchy, godly flavour. Gabriel looked like a bear with a sore head as Timely himself remarked and I was almost sorry for him, inclined to comfort him with the nails there and then. But his curt request that I get out of his way caused a hardening of heart and I was glad when Malpas himself called me to the murky space behind the oven to see the silver-fish, slender, silver-shining lizard-seeds, scurrying as their haunts were wrecked. With difficulty I collected several into my matchbox after discarding the butterfly wings, only to find, ten minutes later, that they had escaped into my crowded pocket. There were a few cockroaches too, flinching from the light; brown, flat-oval shapes which Timely annihilated with a blow-lamp.

Free to move as I liked I sat for a long time like a king among the sacks, watching Malpas pile kindling and logwood into a small oven in a corner and light it, afterwards making and shaping a short-dough, as he called it, into wheat-sheafs, no easy task for each ear of corn had to be rolled and cut singly before being fixed on the flat wet dough of the foundation shape. Score after score were pressed into place, some straight, some drooping, to give a natural effect, and then the wheat stalks must be rolled and cleverly joined to the lower, drooping ears. Next a bond was formed of a dozen straw lengths twisted loosely

together and tied in a knot, this being placed across the centre of the sheaf in a loose bend and the ends tucked away underneath. A glazing of egg wash and a skilful stabbing in line with the straws with a pointed knife to prevent cracking and the loaf was ready, a simple masterpiece.

Having watched with such care I thought I would make a small one for myself, and a little dough was smilingly granted me. But it quickly became grubby under my kneading and thumbing and I gave up, making instead a lumpy cat with bristles from one of Malpas' brushes for whiskers, an unsatisfactory piece which was never baked but became sling-fodder with which to pelt the pigeons lined upon the uneven ridge of the high barn.

Inspection of a line of spice-tins kept me busy until it was time for lamps to be lit and the wide door closed against the chill of night. I counted the nutmegs and was a little afraid of the strange shapes of the lumps of black ginger. The smell of caraway seeds gave me a complete sense of holiday and I did not hesitate to stage a battle of canoes with a number of Mexican vanilla pods. These, seven or eight inches long, narrowing and curving towards the end, a rich, dark brown *native* colour, waxy to the touch, delighted me intensely and when, a little later, a bell rang in recall I was not reluctant to go for I took with me one of the pods, a gift of great comfort, more suggestive of bloody adventure to my eager mind than all the books and trophies in my father's house.

Alone again in the great cold bed, after milk and cake under my aunt's sad eye, the pod in hand, I steered a strange course, simulating the whine of wind and the slop of waves, bullyragging my crew in veteran style until sleep came, deep as death.

Church bells down the valley, a bounding and racing of silver wheels as it seemed, awoke me the next morning, and I was reminded at once of the three nails and hoped fervently that Sunday was cheerfully celebrated here as at home and not made an occasion for gloom and whispers, although, remembering my aunt's crucifix and the little black book I was not a little afraid that solemnity might be compulsory.

The sky was again clear so at least I should not be forced to remain within doors. Leaving the bed after long search for the vanilla pod I dressed hastily in my old clothes before I could be told to don my best, skipping downstairs and greeting my aunt punctiliously. I soon saw, however, that she was in no special Sunday mood, and I was allowed, after washing and combing and a brushing of my boots, while waiting for breakfast, to walk in the overgrown garden at the back of the house, a broken-fenced square, banked with mallows and marigolds and a few moss roses and with a stunted apple tree in the middle from which wash-lines radiated like a spider's web, an interesting place even before I discovered an old brass cannon sunk among the mallows and a

number of large, smoky-white puffballs of an exact size to serve as cannon-balls. Breakfast seemed of no importance after such a find, but I prudently thought it wise to obey my aunt's summons.

But three of us sat at table, Timely and Gabriel being still hard at work. I hoped that the Harvest Sheaves had turned out well and Malpas assured me they had. I wanted to see them, but they had already gone to decorate the church and that far I would not go I declared emphatically, wilfully. Malpas smiled at that, knowing my father's opinion of established religion, and we seemed to share a feeling against my aunt which only Malpas regretted for he soon left the table to work at his accounts in the dim privacy of the shop.

Alone with my aunt I ate quickly, against my inclination for the food was new and delicious in flavour as only food eaten away from home can be. But I disliked her unsmiling habit; she was like a rusted lock of which the key was lost. I wondered whether the nails, so large in my small pocket, would rouse her, but argued that they must be returned to Gabriel in the first place since he had paid for them. With this in mind I asked whether Timely and Gabriel would join us for the mid-day meal, and she said that they would, waking suddenly, bustling away into the kitchen to make preparation for the meal. For a little while I watched her before returning to my play with the ancient cannon, astonished that one so pretty could be so dull.

The morning passed all too quickly. I ate two apples from the stunted, cankered tree with my aunt's uncaring permission — very green and sweet they were, like none I have tasted since — and went twice to examine the curiously exaggerated graining of the window shutters of the shop, pretending that they were the maps of the campaign upon which I was engaged. With a few inadequate stones I built an impregnable fort, firing the cannon at considered intervals, thumping a rusted churn and hurling a puffball in the direction of my imaginary enemies. Once one broke against the kitchen window and I waited anxiously for reproof, but my aunt merely pursed her lips and went on stirring and I was puzzled by such unnatural behaviour.

A village boy came with vegetables from his father's garden, stared oafishly at my fortifications, received a cake from my aunt and the empty basket and went away, his boots squeaking loudly, dismally. Two salvoes of puffballs fell into the pond but the pond grimaced in such a hurt manner and the balls floated so foolishly that I changed my front and blamed the enemy for the mistake. A pleasant smell of baking came at times from the open kitchen door, mingling oddly with the smell of mallows and camomile and the battlefield stench of nettles.

Sounds came, too, from the near village; a shout, an unexpected clang of metal, the lowing of a cow and once the barking of a dog that was

exactly like the rasp of a hauled chain; all to be translated into signals and alarms. The closer snap of the oven door became the sound of a breech-lock, and it is possible that I found convenient meaning in even the clink of crocks and spoons and the methodical striking of a clock. Sprawled in the coarse grass, smaller sounds too could be heard, among them the ticking of insects and the queer, growing sound of earth and stems and feeding things, indescribable but never forgotten. I talked a bit to myself at times and gave loud commands which I obeyed myself. Fortunately, for I hated ridicule, my aunt was too sad and busy to be amused. Unsmilingly she presently bade me run to summon Malpas, Timely and Gabriel; dinner was smoking ready and could not be delayed, and I obeyed her briskly, the nails in their wrapping bumping heavily against my leg as I ran, my mind swinging anxiously forward to the moment when I would reveal them.

Seated solemnly at table we watched Malpas carve the joint of mutton, settling to eat without much talk. The pattern of the china was new and pleasing, the food abundant and to my liking so that my eyes did not wander far. I saw, however, that Timely and Gabriel were yet in their working clothes and reasoned that a premature disclosure of the nails would seriously hinder the work which meant so much to Malpas. But it appeared that the work was so far forward that Gabriel's help would no longer be necessary, Timely and Malpas

leaving the table together immediately the pudding was done to decide upon final touches. Alone together, my aunt forgot my watchful presence, questioning anxiously, not looking at Gabriel until he said that he was going that afternoon to find the nails.

“They must be there. I shan’t rest until I’ve found them.”

He really, morbidly believed, despite Timely’s reading of the truth! Let him have them then! And, finishing a biscuit to the uttermost crumb, I lugged out the old velvet bundle and slammed it down upon the table before Gabriel. He stared incredulously: “You little whelp!” Not sure what he might do I edged towards the door, but he was too excited to strike or talk. As if suspecting trickery he examined the nails, then moved to show them to my aunt. But he did not reach her side. Afraid perhaps of my faithful tongue he turned suddenly and hurried past me from the room, leaving my aunt staring wonderingly. Following quickly after him in curiosity I saw him enter the high barn and climb the stairs to his room under the roof. The door bumped shut and I wandered unforgivingly away only to remember almost at once a broad, moon-scraping ladder propped near to the one upper window of the barn. Scurrying round a corner I came to the ladder, found that it was not necessary to move it at all and climbed cautiously, peering through a corner of the dusty glass.

I never knew exactly what the use of the room had been in early days but in its centre, in clear view from the window, was a wooden platform perhaps ten feet square, with an iron guard rail on a level with its surface, raised some three feet from the floor, and it was upon this that a straw mattress had been laid and a bed made for Gabriel. The rest of the room was bare except for an old strip of carpet, some shelves, a battered, painted seaman's chest and a washstand.

Perched upon the ladder, spitting-close to a wedged-open window flap, care was necessary to avoid discovery. I breathed lightly and hardly dared to blink, pleased that the ladder was so long and sound. Gabriel was sitting cross-legged on his mattress, turning the nails over in his hands, his thin, sallow face twisted in strange worship. Not satisfied with the old red velvet as a wrapping he threw it aside, reaching a clean silk scarf from the bundle which held his few belongings, folding it to receive the nails. Startled by a tapping upon the door, he put them away, calling irritably:

“Who is it?”

As I expected, it was my aunt, come to see the precious nails.Flushed of face and open-handed she entered: “Where are they?”

Reluctantly at first, Gabriel showed the nails in his hand, and my aunt went quickly forward, touching them reverently.

“What will you do with them?”

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Gabriel shrugged at the absurdity of such a question.

“You won’t sell them?”

Gabriel shook his head.

“Not even to me? They would mean new life, belief, a new faith and a new beginning.”

“Just as much as they mean to me.”

“You can’t mean that. You don’t understand. Isn’t there anything you want? You are young and free, you have no need of something to hold to as I have.”

She looked very pretty in her pleading, bent beside him, her face pink and eager, one hand caught in the fine lace of her collar, but I lost the rest of her words for Malpas was standing at the foot of the ladder, looking up enquiringly. Hastily I put finger to lips, waving him away, but he was curious and to my alarm swung easily up the ladder, standing below me, his head on a level, his fine, white hands tight beside mine. Together we watched, although there was not much more to see. Gabriel was no longer intent on the nails. He was staring at my aunt.

“You’d give that much for them... not because you like me?”

“I do like you, and if you liked me as well you’d give them to me, please.”

My aunt eyed Gabriel shrewdly, enticing in her movements, but there was shrewdness in his glance also, shrewdness and a new excitement.

“If you’ll come here this evening, as nice as you can, why they’re yours.” He rose suddenly, holding and kissing my aunt clumsily. She would have taken the nails from him, but he held them playfully out of reach.

“This evening...”

My aunt nodded, hesitated, as if thinking: “Why not now?” then was gone, and Gabriel wrapped the nails carelessly in the scarf and laid them on a shelf, fingering his chin, taking a razor and shaving brush from his bundle. Not sure what he was going to receive from my aunt in exchange for the nails, I turned to Malpas, but he was already feeling his way down the ladder, his face shut and ugly. Following quickly, I begged him to explain, but he hardly heard me, standing woodenly, his clothes more loose than ever about him. At last aware of me, he questioned harshly:

“Those nails, were they the ones he bought from the gipsies?”

I told him yes, and he touched me heavily: “You go and play, boy, and say nothing,” and away he went, lumberingly, urgently, into the bakehouse, where I heard him talking of another necessary job with Timely, new work in which Gabriel must help.

Mystified, I returned to the house, determined to miss nothing of the coming transaction. My aunt was clearing the table, awkward in her movements. I offered to help but she was sure she could manage.

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Although I had done nothing to deserve them she gave me sweets from a gaudy tin before going away upstairs to her room to rest, as she said carefully. It was the custom of the house to replace five o'clock tea with a high tea at eight on Sundays, so there was plenty of time for her to meet Gabriel to receive the nails before the meal.

Alone, I idled with the several odd books on the mantel shelf, pleased with the foxed prints and marbled end papers in an edition of *Sturm's Reflections*, but hardly caring for the pompous essays, all chosen expressly to glorify a curiously insubstantial God the Maker. The questions and answers in *Nelson's Festivals* were entirely meaningless to me, and dull too was the text of a *Practical Gardener* or *Gentleman's Directory*. Absurdly pleased with a table of Kindred and Affinity discovered in a *Hymnal Companion*, I went back and forth across the yard, chanting from the list:

A man may not marry his:  
*Grandmother;*  
*Grandfather's Wife,*  
*Wife's Grandmother,*  
*Father's Sister,*  
*Mother's Sister,*  
*Father's Brother's Wife.*

Until I was stopped by the mocking cry of a village boy, newly come from a Sunday school-class. Hurrying indoors, I replaced the book on

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the shelf, looking about, finding a wooden box of screws in a kitchen drawer, screws which I solemnly proceeded to line up on their heads in their various sizes to form an army across the ribbed white oak of the table, bowling them over with well-directed lead shot emptied from a cartridge which I prudently damped before hacking open. Wearying, presently, of this slaughter I found scissors and cut out a number of figures from an old religious almanac, only remembering the nails after serious work on a melancholy figure of Christ on the Cross, hastening at once with renewed curiosity.

Crossing the yard with exaggerated stealth I saw Timely and Gabriel busy puddling mortar, Gabriel careless at the task so that Timely was forced to remonstrate. Very well knowing that he would find some excuse to leave when the time was ripe, I crept

away back to the ladder propped against the high barn, climbing to the window. The room was empty, the nails still on the shelf. I wondered what the time might be and tried to judge it from the sun. At what time did evening begin? The gnats were lively at my hands and knees, but I forgot them in the excitement of seeing the door of the attic open and my aunt slip inside. She wore a white lacy gown, very becoming to her pink and white beauty, and her hair was newly, carefully dressed. She looked about her, fingering Gabriel's bundle and searching in the pockets of a jacket hanging from a hook. Then she saw the silk bundle on the shelf, and tipped

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it open, touching the nails lightly, caressingly, her lips parted in mute adoration. I tried then to understand what use three nails could be to her, but could make no sense of it.

For a long time she stood so, broodingly, waiting, tempted once to carry them away without waiting longer for Gabriel. At last a hand on the door caused her to turn, but she was unprepared for the sight of Malpas. Swiftly he shut the door behind him, advancing, a thin rope swinging from his hand, a hammer in the other. She moved back and would have pretended that she had merely come to straighten the room had she not seen knowledge in Malpas' eyes. His face was quite hard and white, the few freckles looking like the beginning of rottenness, and his collar was broken at the buttonhole. Frightened, she made to run

by him to the door, but he dropped rope and hammer and caught her by the wrists, tightly so that the nails fell from her hands and were scattered. Holding her with one hand, he caught at her dress, ripping it from her shoulders. But the hooks held fast and he let her go.

“Take off your clothes.”

My aunt backed away, white and stutter-mouthed, pulling the dress back on her shoulders, far from understanding his purpose.

“If you don’t, I will.”

“Why? What are you going to do? I’ve done no wrong that you should...”

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Malpas spoke across her voice: “You’ll see. Off with those clothes!”

He would have dragged again at them, but my aunt moved first and the dress fell from her. Standing in petticoat and bodice, she waited tremblingly.

“All of them!”

My aunt spread her hands appealingly, but Malpas was intent on fastening the door against intrusion. Desperately now she tried to force past him, but he knocked her back.

“Off with them!”

In weeping terror she obeyed, taking off her garments one by one, even to her shoes and stockings, standing naked, huddled and afraid. For a moment it seemed as if Malpas would do no more, but his eyes chanced upon the nails and he picked them up, all three, and slipped them into his pocket, looking for the rope, and crossing to the raised place, flinging aside the straw mattress and bedclothes so that the wood was clear. Without a word he caught hold of my aunt, forcing her down upon the wood. She struggled and screamed and he struck her sharply across the mouth so that she was silenced.

“You’ll see, you’ll see,” he muttered.

She lay drawn up upon the platform, weeping so that her whole body was shaken. A slash of his knife and Malpas had divided the rope into

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three uneven lengths and had caught hold of a wrist, binding it securely in tether to the rail upon one side. My aunt struggled again, but he held her easily and soon the other wrist was tied so that she lay stretched flat. A loop about her ankles and he had drawn her legs taut, too, and fastened them so that she lay helplessly.

“You’d do anything to have them I heard you say.” It was unlike Malpas’ voice at all: “They mean so much... you look at them and love Him, not me. Well,

you shall feel them too and know all there is to know, you bitch!"

And he took up the hammer and felt for one of the nails, prising open her hand, pressing the palm uppermost. An agonised shriek followed the hammer-stroke, and Malpas stuffed the silk scarf into her mouth, striking again so that the nail penetrated her palm and was fixed firmly in the wood. At once her every muscle bunched tightly, the veins swelling large, her whole body quivering as if touched by death, but Malpas seemed not to see her pain and knelt to nail her other hand. He raised his hammer and her fingers bunched convulsively and clawed against the nail, but he struck firmly and the nail penetrated. Intending a second and final stroke he lifted the hammer again, but it was loose in his hand and the nail was driven no further but bent a little and snapped short so that the writhing hand pulled free and lay bleeding and twitching as far as the rope would allow.

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Malpas stared crazedly. He was breathing heavily, loudly, sweating as if he had run far. He dropped the hammer and took out the third nail, turning it about in his hand, flinging it suddenly away. He looked down at my aunt's quivering body, snatched away the choking scarf. Her moaning seemed to puzzle him, and then he knelt, pulling frenziedly at the first nail to loosen it in the wood, banging it with his fist. But it was fast, and after a moment he groped for the hammer, hesitating, striking timidly, then hardly so that the nail snapped.

Gently he lifted her hand free, hacking at the ropes many times before they parted.

Freed, my aunt drew herself together, holding her hands to her mouth, whimpering and weeping, blood dripping on to her breasts.

Malpas stared confusedly: “You see, you see, all lies,” he grumbled, and he touched one of the broken nails: “You would give yourself for *that!*”

Realisation of my aunt’s agony came suddenly and he spoke differently, as if he himself were bleeding inside, wrapping her gently in one of the tumbled blankets, wrenching open the door, returning, lifting her, carrying her away down the stairs.

Intensely interested, I waited unpityingly on my perch, and presently Gabriel came in a glad hurry, only to stare in astonishment at the clothes scattered over the floor, at the rope ends and the

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broken nails. Swiftly he understood and went hastily away. I saw him cross the yard into the road and I thought at first he had gone for a policeman maybe. But he did not return, and after a while I went to tell Timely what had happened, needing some explanation for why should folk hurt themselves so over three not even shiny nails? Very patiently he heard me out, nodding tiredly: “Yes, yes, son, I see,” and he went with me into the house, going upstairs, returning

quietly, preparing tea for the two of us. I thought that a doctor would be needed, but Timely explained that a doctor would not understand, that Malpas was healing her and I thought it right that he should do so, having hurt her so. After tea, Timely walked with me a little way through the fields, lifting two tiny trout from a brook, talking quietly:

“Twould be brave and kind if you said naught to anyone about those nails, son.”

“Not even to my father?”

“Not even to him.”

“They were bad nails, anyway, just as you said.”

“Aye, and best forgotten.”

And so we left it, sensibly, talking of other, more friendly things until it was time to return through the dusk for milk and cake and bed. It was Timely himself who tucked me away with a wax-light on either side that night, he who slipped an unexpected gift of a perfect skeleton of a mouse, safe in a bit of corked bamboo, into my hand.

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Faint sobbing sounds came sometimes through the dividing wall, and a low, comforting voice that was like that of the God of my imagination, gently planning a new to-morrow. But I was tired and quickly

fell asleep, my last thoughts being of the homeward ride, a pleasant circus-medley of lords and cidermen, downland and forest in which my mother moved with all her former cheerful vigour and my father danced like an American bear for my delight.

Breakfast was early over on the following morning, Timely cooking an abundance for us both, beside packing my basket with food enough for a dozen. His pleasure at the sight of numerous half-burned books on the hearth was subdued but very definite. Of Gabriel there was no sign and we did not complain. Malpas came downstairs as we finished, weary-faced, but young in his step and he led me silently to bid my aunt good-bye. Very white and still she lay in the bed, her hands heavily bandaged and folded on her breast. I kissed her carefully for she seemed fragile enough to vanish in petals and she smiled ever so faintly. Malpas held me squarely for a moment in the doorway, saying not a word but pulling a fine gold coin from a waistcoat pocket, tucking it into my fist as into the mouth of a puppy.

Timely thought we should be moving on our way. With complete understanding he clapped Malpas on the shoulder, pursing his lips funnily: “Get to your baking master. You’ll never need

to worry again.” That was all, and Malpas was grateful for his sympathy. Very willingly, for the place had lost colour for me, I climbed to a seat in the waggon and

Timely mounted beside me. The horses, well rested, pulled strongly forward, racing with the almost empty waggon out of the yard. The morning was very still and rich and new. At the bridge, beyond the square-towered, glum-puckered church, Gabriel was waiting dejectedly, perhaps ashamedly, and I saw our journey ruined. Selfishly, impulsively, I forced the gold coin and my father's unspent half-crown upon Timely:

“Whip up! Whip up! I hate him!”

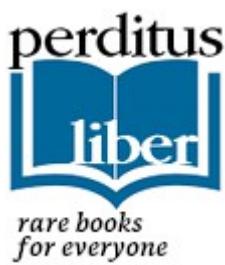
But Timely needed no persuasion: “So do I, just now.” Brushing the coins aside he grabbed his whip and the team galloped splendidly past, Gabriel running for a minute, then dropping behind. Safe on our way, I presently regretted the impulse, questioning anxiously:

“Will he get home all right?”

“Sure as a fox!”

“Then you must give him this so that he can buy some good nails or anything else he wants.”

Quite firmly I insisted that Timely take the gold piece and it happened as he had said. Gabriel returned a day later, tired-footed and wavering in his beliefs, receiving the coin. But it was not nails he bought with it. Many times I asked exactly how he spent it, but Timely never would tell me and now, guessing, I cannot say that I blame him.



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